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AIR FORCE SENIOR OFFICER PROMOTIONS

BY

Lieutenant Colonel Frank P. Cyr, Jr.  
United States Air Force

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### AIR FORCE SENIOR OFFICER PROMOTIONS

#### AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The United States Air Force officer promotion system has recently been severely criticized by Congress and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). Accusations of impropriety and disregard for statute have caused the Air Force to make significant changes to the manner in which it identifies its senior officers for promotion. This paper begins by reviewing the legal framework for officer promotions and describing specific Air Force policies and procedures to implement an equitable promotion system. Congressional concerns with the brigadier general selection process, and subsequent changes recently implemented by the Air Force in response to these concerns, are then examined. The promotion process up through colonel has thus far been able to avoid the negative publicity focused on flag officer selections; however, OSD has concern at this level, too. Based on over six years of personal experience conducting Air Force promotion boards for all grades through major general, the author then presents several possible changes to promotion board guidance and procedures, and recommends two for adoption to improve the overall effectiveness, utility and credibility of the central selection board process.

## **INTRODUCTION**

During the coming years, taking care of our people will remain our most important challenge. Senior Air Force personnel managers are already implementing new programs to ease the transition to a smaller force while ensuring we retain the highest quality individuals.<sup>1</sup> A key aspect of this effort is how we identify the best personnel for advancement to higher grades. The Air Force officer promotion system has continually evolved and, like the organization it supports, must remain responsive to the needs of leadership. While this paper will not suggest we start with a clean slate, it will examine several areas in the Air Force officer promotion system which may benefit from fine tuning to improve its effectiveness as a personnel management tool.

The Air Force officer promotion process does more than simply identify individuals for advancement, it codifies our solution to a critical organizational imperative: succession planning. How we identify the next generation of Air Force leaders is essential to the survival of organizational values. If it was only a mechanical process of weighing measurable factors to determine who has filled the most squares, the services would not need promotion boards with human board members. Yet, because it is so central to our continued existence, the officer promotion system, and the selection board process upon which it is founded, should always be open for review and improvement to keep pace with changes in the organization, its people or its environment.. In the words of Secretary Rice, "Change is often unsettling. But change

is also absolutely essential for growth." 2

Can today's Air Force officer promotion system weather the effects of the changes taking place in our world? If we believe reports coming out of Congress, there is not much worth keeping in the current system. How can we correct management problems, restore credibility and still confidently select the best men and women to lead us through an era of budget cuts, force reductions and undefined threats to national security? Answers to these questions may not become apparent for several years, yet we can not afford to wait until the picture clears to move ahead.

Traditionally, talk of change to the officer promotion system draws immediate caution flags from all corners of the room. After all, senior leadership has risen through the current system and has a vested interest in protecting it. Yet, new public revelations about Air Force senior officer promotions provide ample reason for self-examination. A recent cover of the Air Force Times announced "The Promotion Mess" tabloid-style, from check-out stands at base exchange stores worldwide in full view of passing officers (and their families).<sup>3</sup> Not to be outdone in bringing military mismanagement to light, The Washington Post quickly jumped into the act. Headlining "Air Force Promotions Tainted," the Post claimed the Air Force had "systematically breached the law and Defense Department regulations...[using a] secret system--within-a-system unknown to Congress or the secretary of defense for 30 years."<sup>4</sup> Senator John Glenn (D-Ohio), a retired Marine Corps colonel and Chairman of the Armed Services Manpower and Personnel Subcommittee, claimed, "there's nothing more sacred than promotion boards. They're behind locked doors, they're supposed to

give their opinions without fear or favor and base [promotion] solely on what's in the record."5 What is going on here? Have the wheels come off a system that has functioned smoothly for so many years?

### **Purpose**

This paper will examine the state of the Air Force officer promotion process, with emphasis on promotion to colonel and brigadier general. These two grades are crucial in identifying senior leaders to fill our most important positions of responsibility. These two promotions are the most competitive, and any worthwhile promotion system must be able to consistently and successfully select the very best qualified individuals at the upper levels of the population. This paper begins with a brief review of the roots and fundamental principles of our current promotion system, followed by a look at recent developments in the general officer selection process. It will then review several proposed changes to the central promotion process and close with recommendations which, if adopted, will upgrade the capability and credibility of the current system in the eyes of Congress, the Department of Defense and Air Force officers around the world.

### **Scope**

There are limitations to this paper. For one, it will not address the analytical side of the Air Force promotion program. The reader will not find a lengthy discussion of the dynamics of promotion opportunity or year group management. Likewise, historical promotion rates and comparative statistical analyses with our sister services might provide helpful insights, but tend to fall short of generating innovative solutions to new problems. Neither does this paper return to a *tabula rasa* from which to write a new of-

ficer promotion process. For example, an argument could be made that simply based on the shrinking size of our officer corps over the next few years, the current system is inappropriate and an entirely new system would better meet the needs of a smaller force.

Similarly, changes which require legislative remedies are not addressed. The likelihood of Congress entertaining any changes to promotion laws at this time is quite low; their overriding focus is on compliance with existing laws. And finally, any change to a dynamic, multi-leveled system will necessarily have multiple second- and third--order effects. Some are obvious and intended, others don't emerge until years later and themselves cause additional changes. This paper addresses only the most likely outcomes of the proposed changes; others will most certainly occur to the reader.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Promotions, Law and Policy**

Officer promotions for all military departments are governed by law. Title 10, Chapter 36, United States Code (USC), specifies legislative requirements for promotion of officers on the active duty list, and was created in 1981 by the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA). DOPMA was a major change to previous officer personnel laws based on the Officer Personnel Act of 1947 and the Officer Grade Limitation Act of 1954. DOPMA eliminated differences in officer management among the services. In the specific area of officer promotions, DOPMA abolished temporary pro-



motion authority, and replaced it with a universal permanent promotion system. Also included for the first time were promotion timing and opportunity guidelines for grades up through colonel.<sup>6</sup>

Law gives the service secretary many specific authorities and responsibilities regarding officer promotions. For example, the Secretary of the Air Force convenes boards, appoints board members, charges each board with specific guidance regarding their work and reviews the board's recommendations.<sup>7</sup> The Air Force Deputy Chief of Staff, Personnel develops policies which comply with and implement law and ensures each central selection board operates properly. Selection boards for grades up through colonel convene at the Air Force Military Personnel Center in San Antonio, Texas; those for general officers in Washington, D.C..

Over the years, Air Force promotion policies and procedures have tried to ensure fairness and equitable consideration for all eligible officers. Fundamental safeguards have long been in place to foster and preserve board member objectivity and eliminate undue influence in the promotion process. By law, each board member must swear an oath to "perform his/her duties as a member of the board without prejudice or partiality, having in view both the special fitness of the officers and the efficiency of the United States Air Force."<sup>8</sup> Upon conclusion of the board, each member signs the board report certifying they have carefully evaluated the records of every officer eligible for promotion and only recommended the very best qualified for promotion. Their report is reviewed and signed by the Board President, forwarded through the Chief of Staff for the Secretary's review and approval, and then on to the Chairman, Joint Chiefs

of Staff for final review. Final approval authority in the Department of Defense for all officer promotion board reports is the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Force Management and Personnel.

Senior personnel officials use different tools to effectively manage officer promotions. Each tool represents a policy decision by the Chief of Staff or Secretary on the best way to meet Air Force needs. For example, for many years Air Force policy on eligibility and timing for promotion has been based on year group management. This means officers generally compete for promotion based on when they entered active duty. For example, the Air Force colonel promotion board which met in September 1991 considered in the primary zone lieutenant colonels who entered active duty in 1970. The law requires service secretaries to establish eligibility requirements; Air Force year group management policy put the 1970 year group in the primary zone last year. 9

Similarly, Air Force policy, not law, requires annual selection boards for each officer grade. And, while DOPMA indicates desirable promotion opportunity windows for each grade, service secretaries approve specific promotion opportunity for each board, and decide which competitive categories will be considered.<sup>10</sup> Policies concerning year group management, board scheduling and promotion opportunity give senior personnel managers flexibility to cope with changing grade ceilings, retention peaks and valleys, and force structure increases or decreases. These policies are periodically adjusted when required, much the same way we open or close water faucets to produce the desired flow.

## **Role of Promotion Boards**

Before proceeding any further, we should understand how the Air Force uses promotion boards in its overall personnel management system. While this may seem to be rather obvious, it is nevertheless important. How each service uses its officer promotion boards is tied to its approach to personnel management. At the risk of oversimplifying, promotion boards can either be seen primarily as a force management tool or a succession planning tool. In reality, boards act as a combination of both, but one aspect or the other seems to have priority when closely examined.

When used as a force management tool, promotion boards produce results which directly support the service's near-term personnel utilization plan. In other words, boards will promote individuals in the needed specialties or career fields to fill projected requirements in those specialties in the next higher grade. A good deal of effort is made to identify desired outcomes by specialty in advance of the board. Systems analysts study attrition rates, force structure changes and historical trends by specialty to project as accurately as possible where requirements will exist in the twelve months following board adjournment. This analysis produces specialty goals or minimums which are communicated to the board when it convenes. Under this force management approach, boards know what types of officers should be promoted to fill future known requirements. Once the results are known, personnel managers assign new selectees to requirements in their specialty at the higher grade. Promotion boards in this system assist personnel managers and senior leadership by replenishing unfilled or undergraded positions by specialty.

The Army officer promotion system establishes floors on the minimum number of officers to be promoted in specified critical skills if there are enough fully qualified officers eligible in those fields to meet the needs of the service.<sup>11</sup> For some grades, certain skills are in a shortage condition. For example, a recent Army colonel promotion board was informed that critical shortages existed in engineers, communications and intelligence officers.<sup>12</sup> Following secretarial guidance, Army promotion boards select the minimum number of officers specified in critical skills, whether or not that minimum number has scored high enough to make the initial cut.<sup>13</sup> If there are not enough officers in a specified critical skill above the promotion quota line on the relative order of merit, the board goes below the quota line, identifies the next highest scoring records of officers in that skill, places them above the line (i.e. selects them) and drops below the line (i.e. de-selects) a corresponding number of officers not in critical specialties.<sup>14</sup> Boards may meet these minimums only from among those fully qualified officers in- and above-the-zone; no additional below-the-zone officers may be selected to meet the minimums.<sup>15</sup> In this way, Army promotion boards act as force management tools for specified skills by filling shortages identified by the Secretary.

Promotion boards which use promotion floors to select within skills are quality--levelling force management tools. If selecting the highest quality officers from among all eligibles were the only consideration, promotion floors could not be used. Floors require some boards to displace higher scoring records (higher quality) with lower scoring records (lower quality) to meet service needs. When describing the functions of Army promotion boards, Army Pamphlet 600-3 lists meeting branch and grade requirements

before promoting the best qualified officers.<sup>16</sup> Within the law and the guidance provided from the Secretary to their boards, quality displacement is permitted in certain circumstances. While the overall quality of the selections is not as high as it could be (depending on how far below the "promote" line the board must dip to ensure all critical requirement career field quotas are met), all of the selectees are fully qualified for promotion. While this may appear merely expedient to some, or remarkably creative to others, it in fact is perfectly legitimate and codifies a unique and effective approach to filling senior leadership requirements.

It is not, however, the only way to look at promotion boards. With only minor exceptions at the general officer level, the Air Force does not use the requirements--based officer promotion system described above. Air Force promotion board members are not given specific guidance about shortage career fields in the formal instructions from the Secretary of the Air Force. Neither is there the extensive pre-board skill analysis to determine desired minimums for the board to select. Instead, the Air Force selects officers to fill vacancies in grade, *regardless of specialty*.

This vacancy-based promotion system establishes a target number of overall selections for the board based on projected grade inventory and legislative ceilings. Specialty requirements are not considered. The Air Force does not ask its promotion boards to replenish skill shortages. Instead, mindful of the importance of quality in the succession process, it unequivocally challenges each promotion board to select the best qualified individuals from among all who are being considered.<sup>17</sup> If the board does not select enough officers with particular skills needed in the higher grade, so be

it. True, assignment staffs may be challenged to effectively use the new selectees. Nevertheless, the promotion board will have identified the very best qualified officers from among those eligible that year throughout the Air Force for advancement to higher grade. This policy is widely publicized in literature and briefings to the field and examined at all levels of professional military education.

### **Assessment Tools**

To confidently promote the best officers, the Air Force has developed an evaluation tool called the "Whole Person Assessment."<sup>18</sup> Board members are told to evaluate the records of officers eligible for promotion using these seven factors which have been reviewed and approved by the Secretary of the Air Force:

## **USAF WHOLE PERSON ASSESSMENT**

### **FACTOR**

Performance

Professional Competence

Leadership

Job Responsibility

Breadth of Experience

Specific Achievements

Education

### **EVALUATE**

Promotion Recommendation and  
Performance Reports

Expertise within Specialty

Command and Staff Experience

Scope and Exposure

What/Where/When

Awards and Decorations

Formal and Professional/  
Level and Utilization

While all of these factors are important, documented performance in the current position is paramount when evaluating an officer for promotion. It is the best indicator

of potential to assume positions of increased responsibility which come with promotion. Factors are not assigned numerical weights; neither is this process purported to be an objective evaluation against a set of standards. Rather, board members use their experience, breadth of knowledge and maturity to make a *subjective* assessment of each record, then translate that assessment into an *objective* score. In the end, board members score highest those officers who have demonstrated the most potential to assume greater responsibilities in a higher grade.

Board members use the scoring scale shown below to translate their subjective evaluations into objective ratings for each record.<sup>19</sup> The overall record is rated on this scale with a single score between 6 and 10, rather than each characteristic of the Whole Person Assessment. Each record receives five scores, one from each member of the panel reviewing it. A slightly different scoring scale is used for general officer promotion boards with a 10 point range.

SCORING SCALE		
absolutely tops	10	> OUTSTANDING
outstanding record	9.5	
few could be better	9	> ABOVE AVERAGE
strong record	8.5	
slightly higher than average	8	
average	7.5	— AVERAGE
slightly below average	7	> BELOW AVERAGE
well below average	6.5	
lowest in potential	6	

Board members can honestly disagree on the relative value of each factor in the Whole Person Assessment or the merits of particular records. A difference of more than a point and a half in scores between two board members on the same record is considered a significant disagreement, and that record is returned to the board for discussion and resolution of the scores to within a point and a half.

The five scores for each record are totaled and ranked in relative order of merit. This listing reflects the spectrum of quality among the eligibles from the highest scoring (i.e. the record with the greatest potential for advancement) to the lowest. The promotion quota is then applied starting at the top of the list until the quota is exhausted. Those within the quota are considered the "best qualified" by the board (since they scored the highest), and are recommended for promotion. Board member agreement that the officers recommended for promotion are truly the best qualified is a legal requirement, certified in the signed board report.<sup>20</sup>

### **Promotion Board Guidance**

Title 10 USC permits boards to give due consideration to "the needs of the armed force concerned for officers with particular skills" when determining best qualified for promotion.<sup>21</sup> As described earlier, the service secretary may indicate these skill needs in written instructions to the board. While the Air Force does not provide specific skill guidance to promotion boards up through colonel, general officer promotion boards are normally told of specific requirements in a few career fields or specialties. To comply with secretarial guidance, general officer promotion boards must recommend enough officers in the appropriate specialties to meet Air Force requirements.<sup>22</sup> Boards below general officer, on the other hand, comply with secretarial guidance by simply recommending the best qualified officers regardless of career field. Theoretically, if an Air Force colonel promotion board recommends 600 officers for promotion, and 98% of them are pilots, as long as the board certifies that those 600 were the best qualified among the eligibles, it would have complied with both law and Secre-



tarial guidance.

Secretarial instructions to a promotion board also contain guidance regarding desired selection rates for minorities, women, and officers with joint duty or professional acquisition experience.<sup>23</sup> Guidance on minorities and women is based in policy, (which supports equal opportunity statutes) and generally states required selection rates for both categories should equal the overall selection rate for the board. If rates in either category are below board average, the board must explain the lower rate(s) in its written report. Anticipated selection rates for professional acquisition officers, Joint Specialty Officers (JSOs) and officers currently serving, or who have served, in joint duty are founded in statute.<sup>24</sup> Low rates in any of over 20 categories of joint officer statistics must be explained to the Chairman, JCS. Failure to consistently recommend enough officers for promotion in any of the above categories jeopardizes approval of the board results.

It should be clear by now that board members have more to deal with than simply evaluating each record using the Whole Person Assessment and scoring scale described earlier. Legislative restrictions and Secretarial guidance put important "spins" on the process by imposing additional requirements on the board in the interest of fairness to groups which have been historically disadvantaged. More about this later. For now, suffice it to say that legislation-based guidance is not unique to the Air Force; all services similarly instruct their promotion boards.

### **Systemic Problems**

Against the backdrop of legislative requirements and evolutionary promotion

board procedures, the Air Force recently faced serious accusations from Congress and OSD concerning the integrity of its officer promotion process. Congress asserted the Air Force has ignored the law and Department of Defense directives concerning promotion to brigadier general by: 1) conducting pre-screening boards, 2) using Priority Lists (PLs) on central promotion boards, 3) allowing inappropriate communications to promotion board members, and 4) failing to issue a regulation on general officer promotions.<sup>25</sup>

Secondly, OSD does not like the Air Force using panels for its officer promotion boards, because under the panel structure, every board member does not review and score the record of every eligible officer. While this panel-based system has been used for over 20 years with Congressional consent, OSD's lawyers are having second thoughts. Interest in the general officer promotion process and panel-based boards comes at a time when the Air Force is in the midst of an extensive self-examination and restructuring. To many Air Force officers in the personnel business and out on the flight line, it must seem like the sky is falling.

### **Constraints to Change**

Those considering changes to the Air Force officer promotion system should proceed cautiously. The system we have today traces its roots to the early days of the American Army, long before the Wright brothers gave us wings. The officer promotion system and the central selection board process which came along later have done a good job for many years in allowing senior leadership to correctly and fairly identify its successors. It would be foolish to discard a refined, proven and adaptable system now,

even in the face of unprecedented Congressional criticism. Yet, if change is inevitable, what are its constraints?

First, any proposed change should advance the organization and the systems which support it. This is not the time to change, in promotions or anywhere else, just for the sake of change. Critical decisions made hastily or for the wrong reasons can cause irreparable damage, no matter how well-intentioned. We should not rush to judgment. Neither should personnel policies be changed today, then changed again next month or even next year. Stability does not equate to stagnation. There is much good, much of value, much worthy of being saved and held up as a standard for others to emulate in the Air Force promotion system. When considering change, our goals and limits should be: 1) to fix all legal and procedural problems and 2) to quality improve a fundamentally sound process. When the dust finally settles, the next evolution should better meet the needs of senior Air Force leadership while retaining all that is good and fair in the current system.

Secondly, as senior personnel officials consider various policy options to deal with the momentous changes taking place in our environment, it is paramount they maintain an ethical balance in the expected consequences of these changes. Changes should be made which will benefit the entire organization to the greatest extent possible. We may have drifted away from this concept slightly in the past few years. For example, law and Air Force policy have put heavy pressure on promotion boards to select a fair share of minority, female, joint duty and acquisition officers. Does this always serve the best interests of the Air Force? Is it possible that, in an attempt to correct past

injustices (perceived or real) to certain groups or foster support for technical specialists, future promotion boards will receive stronger guidance or even specific quotas to remedy the problem? Given it is possible, even probable, is it desirable?

Finally, changes in those areas outside the purview of Air Force or Department of Defense authority require legislative relief. As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons DOD supported and Congress passed DOPMA was to provide common guidelines for each military department to follow regarding officer promotions. Historically, very few service-unique deviations are allowed in this area, and changes to any portion of the promotion laws typically apply to all of the services. This "all or none" rule affects each service's approach to proposed legislative changes. If one service believes a change is required to fix an internal situation, it must first obtain the other services' coordination on the proposed change to convince OSD and Congress of its necessity. None of the changes in this paper require new legislation. (In fact, some respond to recent legislative changes passed by Congress.) All fall within the service Secretary's current legal authority to administer the promotion program.

### **THE FIRST WAVE OF CHANGE:**

#### **BRIGADIER GENERAL PROMOTIONS**

##### **Pre-screening Boards**

Let us begin by looking at what the Air Force has done to satisfy Congressional concerns with general officer promotions. Their initial charge was that all colonels eligi-

ble for promotion to brigadier general were not considered by a central selection board. Since the early 1960s, the Air Force has held annual pre-screening boards at major commands and Headquarters, USAF to identify particularly outstanding colonels for further consideration by a central promotion board. Pre-screening boards allowed only the very best to be sent forward to the final selection board.

In principle, these pre-screening boards were conducted for good reason. War stories, rumor mills, private ambitions and conventional wisdom notwithstanding, few colonels are truly competitive for brigadier general from among the thousands eligible each year. Competitive colonels have normally been promoted early at least once and have succeeded in a series of grooming assignments, culminating as a wing commander or equivalent staff officer when they meet the brigadier general selection board. Screening boards allowed senior commanders to compete their best officers head-to-head within the command, "rack 'em and stack 'em," and focus their support on those truly ready for promotion this year. Importantly, quotas for Air Force pre-screening board nominations were way above the number desirable for selectivity by the central board.

On the other hand, pre-screening boards were time-consuming, required TDY funding for board members traveling in to the headquarters from field units, and ran contrary to 10 USC which intends all promotion eligible officers meet a central selection board. A dozen pre-screening boards met each year Air Force-wide, involving considerable time in preparation and absence from primary duties for over 10-15 board members. Were these boards useful? Obviously, the Air Force thought so. Three- and

four-star commanders probably could have done a credible job just naming their top contenders each year instead of sitting around a table looking at records for a week. But our commitment to an objective board process, reduced central board workload and consistently high caliber of colonels screening through these boards justified retaining the procedure for many years.

One senior officer recently stated he felt there was nothing wrong with pre-screening boards. In his words, "Why would you want to have a group of generals sitting there [at the central selection board] going through 4,000 colonels' packages when 3,700 of them are not in the running?"<sup>26</sup> While reviewing the records of all 4,000 eligible colonels at the final selection board might reveal the broad quality spectrum among colonels, is that surprising? Is it useful? Does it contribute to the purpose of the promotion board? What benefit is served by reading over 3,700 records which are not competitive? General officer promotion board members know what they are looking for in competitive colonels' records. Pre-screening boards effectively narrowed the field without changing the final outcome.

However, Congress is first and foremost concerned with the perception of fairness to all rather than operating efficiency, and specified in a recent amendment to DOPMA that all officers eligible for promotion must meet a single, central selection board. With this change to the law, the Air Force acted quickly in 1990 to discontinue forever brigadier general pre-screening boards.

### **Priority Lists**

Congress also objected to the Air Force practice of using PLs on the central

brigadier general selection board. Submitted by major command commanders and senior staff generals at HQ USAF, JCS and OSD directly to the Board President, these lists prioritized the eligible colonels in an organization who the submitter believed were the very best qualified for promotion that year. Why would the Air Force want such information? First and foremost, PLs were an objective, tell-it-like-it-is assessment of this year's crop of colonels by our most senior and experienced leaders. Say what you will about the desirability of honest, open performance reports, in a reporting system beset by chronic inflation, PLs permitted commanders to delineate within the "best of the best," and brought immense credibility into the board. Handwritten and totally unconfin ed by an exhaustive administrative system of reviews, PLs sent a clear message to general officer promotion boards without becoming a permanent part of an officer's record. They served an important purpose in that they gave board members an unadulterated assessment of the relative potential of many outstanding colonels in the eyes of their commanders.

Secondly, PLs were safeguards to allow any colonel who failed the pre-- screening process to still meet the central selection board *if* his/her commander believed he/she deserved another look. Placing such names on a PL insured their record would automatically be considered by the final selection board. In this way, PLs kept colonels whose potential was better than their record from falling through the crack and never getting a realistic shot at general. A few outstanding general officers are modern-day Lazaruses due to the flexibility PLs gave the selection process. Another way of understanding PLs is that while performance reports, award citations, past as-

signments document a colonel's qualifications, PLs speak volumes about a colonel's *heart*. Perhaps when it came to the crucial task of picking general officers, the Air Force wanted to heed General "Chesty" Puller's caution: "We make generals today on the basis of their ability to write a damned letter. Those kinds of men can't get us ready for war!"<sup>27</sup>

Logically, PLs made sense. When too many candidates are qualified for advancement, how should you pick? Seniority? Command experience? Breadth of experience? Wouldn't it be important and helpful to know how each candidate's commander *really* views his/her potential? Even those who oppose PLs in principle admit the generals who submit them were in the best position to know who was ready for promotion.<sup>28</sup> Others agree, stating,

"The people making priority lists are the most senior generals in the Air Force. The priority list is a way to make the senior officer stand up to his/her responsibility and rank his/her people from one to whatever. That is a necessity to make the system work. When it comes to brigadier general promotion boards, commanders must have a way of designating the truly top performers, those who should be selected."<sup>29</sup>

Perceptually, however, there were problems. Like other policies developed decades ago, PLs have recently succumbed to an onslaught of protests from both within and outside the Air Force. The basic question at the core of the PL issue: Why shouldn't a record stand on its own before the board? Each contains dozens of written performance evaluations. If these reports are inflated or difficult to evaluate, fix the



process, don't subvert the open reporting system with secret lists. After all, if an officer's record is sufficient to base an assessment to colonel, why not to brigadier general?

Is there an important difference between these two grades? Many would argue there is. For one thing, the selection rates are worlds apart. Around 1 out of every 4 or 5 lieutenant colonels eligible in the primary zone make colonel, while only around 1 out of 80-100 colonels make brigadier general. The quality of our best line colonels contending for the annual quota of 35-40 stars is truly impressive. Traditionally, each year 2-300 colonels qualify based on education, experience and performance--any one of whom would make fine generals. The challenge is in selecting the best from among the cream of the crop. Because so few are picked for general, the Air Force wanted its top leaders involved in the process to be sure only the very best pinned-on stars.

Other critics accused senior officers of misusing PLs. Certainly the potential for abuse was there. The integrity of the senior general officer corps was essential in the PL system. Only the Board President and the Chief of Staff reviewed PLs before the board. Couldn't PLs have been used to push personal favorites, those fair-haired men and women close to the throne who were dedicated to making a good impression on the boss? Some distraught colonels are sure they were "blackballed" on a PL or the victims of prejudice which left them off the general's "short list." Yet, during the time I was personally involved in the brigadier general selection process (1981-86) at HQ USAF, I never observed any misuse of PLs, nor was there any historical knowledge of such by those with many years in the business. This does not mean it never happened.

In the end, however, it was the perception of undue influence in the selection process, assumed to be negative, rather than specific instances of abuse, which caught Congressional attention

How did the Air Force solve the PL issue? After considerable study, last year the Air Force formalized prioritization as part of the open, written colonel Promotion Recommendation Form (PRF).<sup>30</sup> Major command commanders and senior staff generals now rank the top 15-20% of their eligible colonels on the PRF which goes both to the officer and the promotion board.<sup>31</sup> This acknowledges the importance of senior officer input into brigadier general selections while removing the cloak of secrecy and perception of unfairness and favoritism. Now each colonel knows where he/she stands for promotion in the organization. Those with false hopes no longer have to wait until the board results are announced to receive objective feedback on their potential. In fact, all eligible colonels should welcome a little quantitative feedback in addition to the qualitative description of their performance and promotion potential provided under the old system. At the same time, boards will not be deprived of timely and crucial senior officer inputs to help them make their assessments. Combined with eliminating pre-screening boards, formalizing prioritization complements a general shift to a more open process.

There are pitfalls the Air Force would do well to avoid when adopting this change. Now that eligible colonels know where they stand within their command ranking for general officer potential, those who discover they are not the true contenders they thought they were may not contribute as much as they once did to the unit mission.

Depression, denial, aggression...all could surface with the realization they have no hope of making general. The last thing the Air Force needs during these turbulent times is to lose a portion of its senior leadership to despair, not to mention the adverse trickle-down effects on their subordinates. Will we witness increased competitiveness and back stabbing among colonels to secure higher PRF ratings? Those who pursue that approach are not the type the Air Force wants to be generals or colonels, and will make themselves easy targets for early retirement. All in all, those with general officer potential will rise to the top under almost any system; those without will fall back, and a small few will complain regardless of any change to the system.

### **Influencing Board Members**

Getting back to the Congressional report, their third finding concerned inappropriate communications to board members. On at least one occasion, boards had received anecdotal information from official sources about some of the eligible colonels which was not documented in their selection folders. In other instances, a casual remark or personal opinion from a senior officer, personnel official, recorder or any other "knowledgeable source" had been misinterpreted by board members as official guidance. While Congress cited this as a problem in general officer boards, their warning applies to all central selection boards. In fact, the potential for compromise exists long before the board convenes.

The Air Force has adopted tighter procedures in this area in an effort to eliminate any "stray voltage" from contaminating board members. When officers are notified to serve on an upcoming board, they are directed to avoid contact with persons and infor-

mation which might influence their objectivity.<sup>32</sup> They are further warned not to do or say anything to eligible officers or superiors that could lessen their objectivity. Likewise, when the board begins, all communications to its members about their duties, responsibilities, the eligible officers and the needs of the Air Force come exclusively from approved, official sources and are documented in writing or taped.<sup>33</sup> Officials who instruct board members, answer questions and provide in-board assistance are being properly sensitized to this subject and will be continually reminded of the importance of preserving board member objectivity. Board members are required to certify before they begin scoring that they have not had any inappropriate communications since being selected to serve on the board, or remove themselves from that duty. <sup>34</sup>

Finally, in an effort to shed more light on the general officer selection process, and address the fourth Congressional finding, the Air Force recently published a new regulation on the subject. AFR 36-9, "Air Force General Officer Promotions," is an important first step. It describes the entire selection process in detail and closes the book on a long-standing "due out" to OSD for an Air Force directive on the subject. We must be careful, however, not to publish a regulation, distribute it to the field...and then forget about it. Many in Congress and throughout the Air Force will closely watch our actions in this arena in the months and years to come.

#### **THE NEXT WAVE:**

#### **PROMOTIONS BELOW GENERAL**

As the above changes ripple through the senior officer promotion process, it seems likely there is fertile ground for change in our promotion system below general as well. Except for their periodic concern about panel-based boards and joint officer career development, Congress has not concentrated as much attention on this aspect of the system, although (or perhaps *because*) the law is even more specific when it comes to officer promotions through the grade of colonel. Most of the officer force, of course, is in the lower grades, and the system must be capable of providing fair and equitable treatment to a much larger population. What can be done to improve the promotion system below general officer? In the following paragraphs, we will examine several possible changes the Air Force could consider to address Congressional concerns, improve operating efficiency and upgrade our ability to select the best individuals as our next generation of leaders.

### **Panels**

The Air Force organizes its central promotion boards into a number of five--member panels, depending on the total eligible population. Each panel is chaired by the senior line officer assigned to it and scores a share of the total eligible population. Typically, a central lieutenant colonel board has five line panels, each scoring approximately 20% of the eligible population. Each panel receives a corresponding percentage of the board's promotion quota which is applied to the panel's relative order of merit. This arrangement was developed when the Air Force first went to the central promotion board concept and has served us very well ever since.

A fundamental tenet of panel concept credibility is that all panels receive the

same quality records. If the record quality differs between panels, it would be tougher to be promoted on some panels, and easier on others. Unless quality among panels is uniform, fairness is impossible and the concept worthless. The Air Force knew it would have to address this problem if it was ever going to justify the panel concept to the officer corps, senior leadership and potential critics.

The solution developed by operations research analysts in the mid-60s was to randomly assign records to each panel using *reversed social security numbers*. Hundreds of tests were run to verify the ability of this method to evenly distribute quality among panels before implementing it on the first "live" promotion board. The results were, and have been, as expected. By any quality measure--performance report index, resident school attendance, command experience, prior early promotion(s), and so on--panel after panel, board after board, the quality of officers among panels is the same. Random checks are still conducted today to verify this phenomenon and validate record distribution among panels. During boards, the quality of records at benchmark score categories on every panel is examined by the board president to be sure a "level playing field" is present.

Yet, there is room for improvement. As mentioned earlier, OSD has expressed reservations about the legality of Air Force panels for the same reason: all board members do not review and score every record. By way of comparison, other services do not use panels. Every board member scores every record. Air Force records receive 5 scores (one from each panel member); Army, Navy and Marine Corps records receive 15-20 scores (one from each board member). Title 10 says a promotion board must

consist of at least five members.<sup>35</sup> Does it make a difference how many board members review a record to assure an accurate assessment? For example, if an outstanding record is reviewed by a panel of five, it will receive a high score. The same assessment should be expected if the record was shown to every member of a 20-member board. In both cases, the record's score would place it toward the top of the relative orders of merit. We would expect similar agreement when evaluating a very low quality record. From the Air Force perspective, it does not make much sense to have 15-20 board members reach the same conclusion that 5 can reach in less than half the time.

But that only works when records are clearly at either end of the quality spectrum. What about those records in the middle, and those near the "cut" where the promotion quota is applied on the order of merit? These records demand a closer look to be sure they are correctly evaluated.

### **Gray Zone Resolution**

The area on a relative order of merit where the quota is applied is called the "gray zone," since these records are almost indistinguishable among themselves in quality and have received the same score from the panel. However, since the board (and hence, each panel) can not exceed the overall quota it has been given, every record in the gray zone can not be selected. Each panel resolves its gray zone by rescoreing the records tied at the cutoff score. Following rescore(s), a "mini" order of merit develops among those records until the final ties are resolved and the lowest scoring "select" and highest scoring "nonselect" are known. This process is difficult

(since the quality of the records in the gray zone is similar) and requires several episodes of rescoring to reach the final outcome.

One approach might be to simultaneously involve all board members in gray zone resolution. Rather than have each panel resolve its own gray, all gray zone records and the remaining quotas from each panel could be combined into a "board gray zone" to be scored by all the members of the board. For example, a board has three panels, A, B and C. Their respective panel gray zones are, A: 10 of 24, B: 19 of 57, and C: 31 of 45. The total number of records in the board gray zone would be  $24+57+45=126$ . The quota of remaining promotions from the board gray zone would be  $10+19+31=60$ . Therefore, the board gray zone resolution would be to select 60 of the 126 records in gray.

Using this approach, those records requiring the closest scrutiny receive the attention of the entire board, not just one panel. The background, experience, judgment and consideration of every board member comes into play when and where it is most needed. The single relative order of merit produced by a board gray zone initial rescore would reflect a consensus opinion and the fruit of the board members' collective (but independently registered) judgment. While there may still be a few records tied after the entire board initially rescues the gray records, it will almost certainly be fewer than under the current system. Saving time, however, is not as important as focusing the entire board on a collective effort at a most critical juncture.

This proposal has precedent within the Air Force central board system. Several years ago when the Air Force held its first Selective Early Retirement Board (SERB), it



developed a new approach to rescoring to meet the unique circumstances of a SERB and at the same time increase senior leadership confidence that the board would select the correct individuals for early retirement. Promotion board gray resolution procedures were considered inadequate for the task of identifying successful senior officers for early retirement, and additional redundancy in scoring was desired. Based on a modified panel concept, the procedures developed for the SERB involved all of its members in board gray zone resolution. These revised procedures are used on every Air Force colonel and lieutenant colonel SERB and clearly demonstrate the benefits of collective focus on gray zone records has merit for central promotion boards.

### **Expanded Scoring Scale**

Another way to improve the process might be to expand the scoring scale during gray resolution to allow board members a more precise discrimination tool. Instead of using the normal 6-10 point scale in *half-point* increments described earlier, why not expand the scale to *quarter-points* or even *tenth-points*? That way, during gray zone resolution, a board member could score a record 7.25 or 7.75; or 7.3, 7.6 or 7.8 instead of only 7.0, 7.5 or 8.0. Increasing the number of available scores by a factor of 2 or 5 minimizes the probability of subsequent ties, and should produce a "clean" (i.e. tieless) relative order of merit on the first rescore. It should not be difficult for board members to use the expanded scale during gray zone rescoring, since the numerical equivalents of the scale have not changed. They would not be using a *new* scale, only an expanded version of the same scale they had been using throughout the board.

An expanded numerical scale precisely supports the guidance board members

receive before they begin gray zone rescoring. With an expanded scale, they can adjust their scoring with precision in the same way a radar screen uses different resolution settings to separate adjacent objects. It more closely resembles the type of internal judgment each board member makes weighing the relative merits of closely grouped records. A small difference here or there can easily be translated into a corresponding score on the expanded scale, rather than forced into a less discriminating one on the conventional scale. Having personally directed close to 100 gray zone resolutions on central selection boards, I am confident board members would welcome an expanded scoring scale to help them differentiate degrees of quality among closely bunched records and translate those distinctions into accurate, quantitative assessments.

Both proposals--board gray resolution and expanded scoring scale--require administrative changes to implement. Computer programs which provide scoring runs must be modified to accept scores other than round numbers and half-point increments. Total scores greater than 50 (5 panel member maximum scores) which reject as errors today will be common with full board scoring. Ballots, too, must be changed to accommodate the new range of scores and number of scorers. None of these modifications, however, are difficult for a skilled programmer.

### **Skill Guidance**

What else can the Air Force do to improve its officer promotion system? One possibility might be found in how the other services employ the provision of law governing secretarial guidance to promotion boards. According to 10 USC 615, the service secretary may provide the board "guidelines or information relating to the need for

either a minimum number or a maximum number of officers with particular skills within a competitive category."<sup>36</sup>

Since the Air Force officer promotion system is based not on *requirements* but *vacancies* in grade, our promotion boards receive different guidance and produce different results. As we grow smaller and our officers more technically oriented, would our interests be better served by providing critical skill guidance to promotion boards? Would this also be a way to insure sufficient joint and/or acquisition officer promotions, if the Secretary determined these were critical skills and communicated this to the board?

### **Career Families**

One possibility being studied at HQ USAF is establishing floors, not by specific career fields, but rather by career families.<sup>37</sup> A career family contains several closely related career fields. For example, the "Mission Support" career family includes, Administration, Personnel Management, Education and Training, and Manpower officers. The "Logistics" career family encompasses Maintenance, Transportation, Services and Supply officers. Other career families are being considered for "Scientific/Technical," "Engineers," "Nonrated Operations," "Rated," and "Acquisition." This structure parallels our current organization for assignment and utilization of the officer corps, yet avoids over-specialization by keeping the family base diverse.

If the Air Force creates "career families," promotion floors could be applied to the below-the-zone population rather than in- and above-the-zone eligibles. This would eliminate the quality concerns described earlier with other systems, since boards nor-

mally select less than 4% of those eligible for early promotion. This approach would help meet Air Force requirements for future leaders in specific fields without causing "on-time" officers to be passed over. On the other hand, nonselection for early promotion, whether due to career family displacement or the quality of the competition, is not a disappointment to most officers and does nothing to affect their future eligibility.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Challenges posed by restructuring, force drawdowns and our emerging growth specialties call for innovative policies. Technically, all of the suggested changes discussed in this paper are legal; procedurally, all are relatively easy to implement. But it takes more than that to recommend their adoption. Each decision to change has ethical implications which must be considered before implementing policies which will affect thousands of Air Force officers. In each case, we should ask: Can we make this change and still feel good about ourselves as a professional organization? Can this policy be thoroughly explained and justified to our officers, or is this yet another instance where traditional standards of excellence are compromised to meet current exigencies? Actions taken behind closed promotion board doors, no matter how necessary, must be effectively communicated for credibility and acceptance by officers in the field. We would do well not to underestimate the impact changes to the promotion system can have to our heritage and *esprit de corps*.

In this regard, the following changes are recommended for further study:

- 1) Expand the present scoring scale from half-point increments to either quarter-point or tenth-point increments for gray zone rescoring. The final decision between quarter-point and tenth-point precision to be made after evaluating the results of sufficient testing with board members scoring records under conditions as near as possible to actual promotion boards. Retain the current half-point incremented scoring scale for initial scoring.
- 2) Replace panel-based gray zone resolution with total board gray zone resolution. Again, several tests of this procedure under near-board conditions will be necessary to validate or repudiate expected benefits.
- 3) Combine changes in both 1 and 2 simultaneously. Together, these changes should complement each other and considerably improve the ability of promotion boards to distinguish subtle quality differences among gray zone records

Conversely, not recommended for implementation are changes instituting career families and expanding specialty guidance to promotion boards. While these proposals address genuine concerns, they must be rejected as contrary to the best interests of the Air Force by raising serious ethical questions about the honesty of a promotion process founded upon the "best qualified" principle. Policies which encourage or formalize "fair share" promotions do so at the expense of individuals not protected by special interests. While this practice has its roots in the equal opportunity/affirmative action laws, more often today it reflects the growing influence of officers with special experience competing for promotion against those with more traditional backgrounds.

Increased pressure to promote specialists, minorities or other interest groups will inevitably come to bear on promotion board members. The Air Force should do every-

thing possible to resist the tendency to ask promotion boards to correct imbalances or deficiencies, past, present or future. Advancing anything less than our very best qualified officers in the name of jointness, equal opportunity or any other worthwhile cause will have a cumulative effect of weakening a proud institution more than any budget cut or force structure drawdown. Maintaining an ethical balance between interest groups, victims of institutional or organizational prejudice and the Air Force at large is vital to our future health. The Air Force must insure its promotion boards act on behalf of the entire officer corps by picking the best qualified for promotion, regardless of race, gender or experience. Anything less erodes the high standards upon which our system is founded.

### **CONCLUSION**

The Air Force promotion system is steeped in tradition and built on integrity, visibility and equity. Unlike other aspects of personnel management such as assignments, retention and accession policy, change does not come often or easily to the promotion process. How any large organization identifies its future leaders and advances them to positions of greater responsibility is fundamentally important to that organization's survival. Changes such as those examined in this paper may not be warmly welcomed. Yet, much to our credit, a new approach to change has captured the Air Force in recent years. No longer adhering to the philosophy, "If it isn't broken, don't fix it," quality conscious managers at all levels are looking to improve processes that have been proven

winners in the past.

The Air Force officer promotion system is a proven winner. It has the support of the officer corps as well as their belief that it is the best, most objective method of identifying the best qualified people for promotion. The selection process to brigadier general needed a healthy dose of *glasnost*. It should quickly right itself and return to a solid footing in our overall personnel management scheme. The process for selecting colonels and below is sound and requires little adjustment, even in these most uncertain of times. But it must not become brackish. Perhaps the larger issue is whether the Air Force can still look at itself in the mirror and honestly say it is promoting the best qualified officers. The proposed changes may not be the right ones to carry us through the remainder of this decade, but creativity and a willingness to consider new approaches are our strengths and gateways to the future.





## ENDNOTES

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